ED 423 066 NATURE NEARBY FOR YOUNG CHILDREN.

1 OF 1 EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIV., JOHNSON CITY.
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DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 066 PS 026 906

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TITLE Nature Nearby for Young Children.
INSTITUTION East Tennessee State Univ., Johnson City.
PUB DATE 1998-07-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the East Tennessee State University Center's Early Childhood Conference (Johnson City, TN, July 17-18, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Conservation Education; Discovery Learning; Environmental Education; Experiential Learning; Learning Activities; *Outdoor Activities; *Outdoor Education
IDENTIFIERS Seasons

ABSTRACT

Young children learn best in nearby natural places, where they can use their senses to experience the pleasures of real discovery. This paper introduces outdoor activities for young children that will help them learn about nature. The activities encourage hands-on discovery based in careful, accurate sensory observation, keyed to the common occurrences of each season. Different activities are presented for each season, introducing children to the cycles of nature, aspects of the natural world, and the importance of ecological conservation in a living classroom. (JPB)

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Abstract of ETSU Early Childhood Conference Worskshop: "Nature Nearby for Young Children"

Nearby natural places are ideal learning environments. Kids *need* contact with things natural. Young children learn best in nearby natural places. Right out in the backyard awaits a perfect "living classroom" for young children. Children gain much from direct contact with the common, "ordinary" right nearby. Here, they can *use* their senses to experience the pleasure of *real discovery*. In the schoolyards and backyards, our young people learn *how to learn* about their world, and also learn important facts about their world. A nature study program for young children should include lots of opportunities for the children to observe and wonder on their own, and to share their discoveries. For these *young explorers*, we should not plan complex lessons based on the latest scientific classification schemes. Rather, encourage careful, accurate sensory observation, keyed to the common occurrences of the season.

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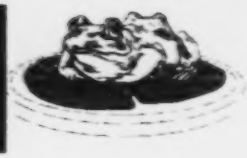
Nature Nearby For Young Children

(Prepared by Marty Silver, Warriors' Path State Park)



A PATHWAY TO DISCOVERY

Kids *need* contact with things natural. Young children learn best in nearby natural places. Here, they can *use* their senses to experience the pleasure of *real discovery*. In the "living classrooms" of schoolyards and backyards, our young people learn *how to learn* about their world, and also learn important facts about their world. A nature study program for young children should include lots of opportunities for the children to observe and wonder on their own, and to share their discoveries. For these *young explorers*, we should not plan complex lessons based on the latest scientific classification schemes. Rather, encourage careful, accurate sensory observation, keyed to the common occurrences of the season.

AUTUMN OUTDOORS

Autumn is the ripe season - ripe with harvest, ripe with tinted leaves, and ripe with opportunities for outdoor education. Now is an ideal time to bring young children outdoors, and help them see their place in the season's cycles.

Outdoor studies in this season naturally focus on autumn as a season of preparation. Dwindling daylight and cooling climate warn of more difficult times ahead. Now each living thing must store supplies against future need.

Let your children experience autumn's rich texture, and they will understand the season better. Share with them the pleasure of seeing leaves ripen and fall, or watching the birds of passage. Look under leaf piles for small creatures that find food and protection here. Notice and have the children collect the many traveling seeds. Have them find seeds that "fly," seeds that "hitch-hike," or seeds that are eaten and travel inside of animals. You might try a "race" with thistle or dandelion seeds. Then wonder together at the power contained in each seed, now sleeping

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until spring's warmth and moisture kindles a sprout. You can increase the wonder by sprouting a few of the seeds you've collected. Sprout them in a cool corner of the room, and then move your new plants outside in the spring.

Let the children spend a few minutes listening to autumn's voices. Each sound has a meaning. Migrating birds "discuss" their preparations to move on to better feeding grounds. A rasping noise up in a tree may be a squirrel gnawing the hull off of a nut. Thus he begins his winter larder. A trilling sound in the grass may be a male cricket, attracting a mate.

Crickets are like many of the smaller, more delicate creatures and plants. They cannot store food, find deep refuges, or migrate south to survive. Instead, they depend on the next generation. Have the children gently catch some crickets. Compare the three "tails" on females with the two "tails" on males. Before frosts quench their spark of life, these crickets will mate. Then the female pushes her long middle "tail" deep into the sod to lay her eggs. Here the eggs survive, well blanketed until warm weather allows new generations to hatch.

Encourage children to bring to class signs of life preparing for the cold, dark, frozen time. Give room for their desire to help - by feeding, sheltering, and giving unfrozen water. Help the children realize that each life needs most to be respected, and left to live its life.

Through observations like these, your children will come to see that autumn's time of preparation also has meaning for us. Just as surely as each seed must hold food for its embryo plant, just as surely as a chipmunk must store beech nuts each autumn, so too we must protect our land's gifts against future need. By guiding our children to wonder at autumn's patterns, we can also guide them on a pathway of greater concern for their land.

WINTER DISCOVERIES

We don't usually think of winter as an ideal time for outdoor studies. Even our children are so used to warmly insulated homes and schools, that many are timid about venturing outdoors. Of course, there are the temptations of snowballs and sleds! And we know that our children need and enjoy contact with natural things, year round. Perhaps we also do. Provided our youngsters are in good health, and warmly dressed, there is no need to keep them indoors in winter. There is so much they would miss!

For children, winter is the pleasure of snowmen, new coats, hot cocoa, and breath condensed into "smoky" fog. But for the wild things, winter is a test. Scarce food, severe weather, frozen water; all make life now a rigorous effort. Children can naturally be led to sympathy, concern, and wonder at this time.

If your school does not already have a bird feeder, it's not too late! A milk jug with a hole cut in the side, filled with sunflower seeds and tied to a tree limb, can be the start of many discoveries. As you watch, you and your children will see that common little finches and chickadees have much to teach us about patterns of bird song and bird behavior. You will also know the warm feeling of helping a fellow creature.

If there are trees nearby, try making bark rubbings. Hold a thin piece of paper against a fairly flat part of the trunk, and rub with soft crayon or charcoal. Take time to enjoy the patterns of bare branches now clearly revealed. You might even challenge the children to find a "perfect" fallen leaf - one with no nibbles, bitten places, insect homes, etc. The futility of such a search teaches much about life's abundance, and life's interdependence.

In their winter rambles, your students are sure to come upon winter insects: cocoons, egg masses, and galls. These should *NOT* be brought into the warm dry

school, for they will either die of the dryness, or hatch too soon because of the warmth, and be unable to survive. If you would like to share with your children the delights of these hidden lives, be sure to keep them in a *LARGE*, airy, not too dry container, in a cool place, such as outside a shaded window. Winter will then be a time of waiting, both for the watching students, and for the hidden "bugs."

When winter sends snow storms, enjoy their crystalline lessons. A furry coat sleeve is a great place to catch flakes as they fall. Children's sharp eyes are the best tools for examining the endless diversity of snowflake patterns. After the storm, try searching for snow stories. Look for tracks, be they wildlife or pets, marks of blowing leaves, or passing children. It's especially fun to follow animal tracks, to see, not just "What was it?," but "What was it doing?"

These are only a few examples of the countless commonplace events of any winter season. There is no end to the delights you and your child can find, no limit to the simple, everyday discoveries. But sadly, because they are so common, many of us never take the time to discover them.

SPRING BEGINNINGS

Spring is a time of youth in the year's cycle. This is the season of beginnings. Reawakening trees tint the hills. Thawing ground and opening blooms scent each breeze. Everywhere there are young of the year, seeming as curious as our own offspring. This fresh new season can bring a fresh perspective to the children in your care.

Our children naturally feel a kinship with the youthfulness of the land. They notice how lengthening days and warming climate spur rapid plant growth. They see seeds become sprouts, and rising sap that swells buds to leaves or flowers. They discover how these abundant plants become food and shelter for abundant animals.

Because of spring's warmth and abundance, we and our children yearn to be outdoors. What better time to begin our young people on a pathway of nature discovery! While we help our children discover spring's renewal, we can also guide them in respect for the delicate new lives of the season.

Let your children discover beginnings. Marvel with them at the tiny leaves packed in buds, and how quickly they open and expand. Carefully dig some of the earliest plants, like buttercup or wild onion. Notice how these early arrivals of spring have energy stored from last year, in bulb-like swellings underground. Be sure to re-plant them, to show your own respect for these green lives. You might save a few of the wild onion tops, and some wood sorrel ("sour grass") leaves, to wash and let your children *taste* spring beginnings.

Because different kinds of insects survive the winter as different life stages, you and your children can discover re-awakening six-legged creatures as new hatchlings from eggs, as larvae or nymphs, as pupae, or as adults. Together, search for cast-off skins and other hints of which was the overwintering stage. Continue to watch for the fascinating changes of shape and form as insects grow.

On dewy mornings, children delight in seeing how moisture highlights spider webs. Help the children to see that there are different types of webs, made by different types of spiders. They will also soon discover how insects are caught and consumed - like kids with sandwich creme cookies, the spider prefers to eat the "gooey insides."

Fresh spring grass is more than just something to mow. Grasslands are busy places in spring and summer. Let the children lie in a sunlit field. If they are silent and patient, they will see many wildlife travelers. Large, coarse rabbit paths, and small, chewed field mouse tunnels are always worth following.

Bird songs are the background music of the season. Give your children the opportunity to delight in the sounds. Then challenge them to listen, to watch, and to ponder the meaning of these sounds. Bird songs at this time may speak of territory, of mating, or of nesting. When your children spot a bird with a beak full of nesting material, see where it flies. You now know where there is an architectural marvel in progress. Give your children time each day to check on "their" bird's nest, from a safe distance!

SUMMER SUN

Summer means sunshine and outdoor funtime for all of us. Whether it be a clear bright day, or dark and "thunderstormy," we and our children can see how the summer landscapes grow green and lush with the power of solar energy. We can also enjoy the incredible variety of busy summer lives in our own backyard.

Begin simply experiencing the warmth of the season. Let your children lie down on the lawn, and *really feel* summer's heat touching them and warming the earth. Soon they will notice how summer's heat also makes the backyard insects more "frisky," while making us a bit too hot! As we retreat to the welcoming shade of the dooryard tree, have them listen for loud buzzing cicadas. Kids love finding the empty "bug shells" they leave behind stuck on tree trunks. Help them find the holes under the tree, where these cicadas emerged after years of feeding on root-sap. After emerging, they leave their underground "clothes" behind as those sticky shells.

Watch how ripe berry patches become laced with critter paths. Box turtles grow so fat on these sweet treats that they can hardly close their shells! Listen to the varied bird song in berry thickets. Like greedy children at snack time, each bird is trying to claim all the berries for himself.

Enjoy the lush green leaves of the season. Admire the varied patterns, textures and shades of green, as well as the varied odors. You may notice tiny tunnels *inside* of leaves, left by leaf miners. Have the children examine these tunnels closely, and they may even spot the tiny insects at work. They eat out the soft inner tissues, like a child eating the jelly out of his sandwich!

Mushrooms sprout well in the warmth and damp of summertime. Help kids learn that they are not "smushrooms," waiting to be stomped. They can see that mushrooms grow from dead things, and help dead things decay. They can also see how many creatures nibble on wild mushrooms. Chipmunks and mice tend to nibble edges, snails and crickets chew holes, and turtles take V-shaped bites. Of course, mushrooms that are safe for *wildlife* are not necessarily safe for *us* to eat.

If summer sends showers, why not experience them? Together, listen to the rain sing in the tree branches, and splash in spreading puddles. Watch as the water seems to purify and give life to all it touches. Soak up a few drops on fingers, toes, and tongue. After a good toweling, your children will be better than ever for their "summer shower."

OUTDOOR KIDS

Our children are like the outdoor lives of our schoolyards and backyards. They too need fresh air, rich land, and pure water, if they are to grow and thrive. We can share with them our delight in each changing season, and our appreciation and concern for its varied life. Thus we can guide them to wish to protect what gives them such joy.

For Further Information:
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Sample
Schoolyard Nature Study Lesson Plans
Available from:
Warriors' Path State Park

Warriors' Path State Park offers a variety of publications to help you plan your schoolyard nature study activities. Here is a list of the *free* materials:

- *Wildlife "Detectives"* - Children are always curious about "critters," yet they have a hard time being quiet enough to find them. But they can always look for clues! Share with your kids this introduction to tracking.
- *Coat Hanger Sampling* - Simple tools are the best tools for schoolyard nature studies! With fewer "gadgets," children are able to learn first-hand. Try a variety of nature "experiments" beginning with simple coat hangers.
- *Winter Botany* - Winter is a perfect time to begin a schoolyard "field trip" to study plants. Students can *feel* plants' amazing survival strategies.
- *Digging into Soil* - "Ordinary" schoolyard soil holds extraordinary opportunities for learning. Help your students "dig into" these soil studies.
- *Tree Seed Planting* - Your students can begin future forests, and discover the amazing miracle held in a seed. Enjoy this easy schoolyard nature project.
- *Micro-Hikes* - Kids are always fascinated by tiny things. Together, you can "magnify" small discoveries on the schoolyard.
- *Schoolyard Conservation Projects* - Children can enjoy success with conservation accomplishments. Their work can make a *real difference* for nature at any school. Here are some sample projects and ideas.
- *Nature Nearby for Young Children* - Some useful tips for working outdoors with very young children, keyed to the four seasons.

To request any of these free materials, or for any other assistance with environmental education, please contact:

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